

6/3/92
m. 9

Personal memo from
JOSHUA LEDERBERG

Mr. G. T. Mazuzan
NSF Historian

JUN 3 1992

Agony for ODSQ

Thank you for yours of 5/28.

That was indeed helpful (and
in any case I enjoyed seeing your
story on NSF grants).

But do you not have some of
his monthly bulletins in the
files?

It does seem ironic today that
Bill* targeted climate history for
deletion.

Sincerely,
Jim Foley

7/24

* He was a new neighbor in Madison Wis
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secrecy regarding reviews.¹⁷

Esoteric Titles

In the 1970s, increasing public concern about Federal expenditures in general brought Congressional examination of NSF grants. In part, the scrutiny was due to what appeared to be the narrow and esoteric nature of the projects supported. In a larger sense, however, the general national malaise surrounding the drawn-out events of the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair spread to the NSF. Those calamitous episodes opened a credibility gap about what the government said it was doing and what it actually did. Public attention focused on the importance of government disclosure of information in a democratic society. The NSF found itself faced with the dilemma over how far freedom of information could coexist with effective but confidential evaluation of grant applications.

As a federal agency, the NSF had long been susceptible to criticism for taxpayer support for any seemingly far-fetched and ridiculous project. The social sciences were particularly open to attack, especially the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and social psychology. Titles of grants and short descriptions of the research claimed most of the attention. To a layman, the subject matter often was wrapped in jargon, and, if simplified, often sounded irrelevant. The fact that, by definition, basic research did not necessarily result in something immediately applicable to the betterment of society made explanations of some

NSF grants even more difficult.

In early 1975, Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin, chairman of the subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations with jurisdiction over the NSF budget, opened the way for congressional criticism of the grant-making process. Proxmire gained much public attention as a self-appointed critic of wasteful government spending. In reviewing the NSF awards list, he found several grants that appeared to him as a possible misuse of public monies. Before the start of the annual appropriation hearings, he told the press that the agency was elitist in favoring certain universities and enumerated five NSF-supported projects which he said were "of nominal value to the American taxpayer who foots the bill." At the hearing, the senator sharply questioned NSF officials.¹⁸

The spirited exchange between Proxmire and NSF Director H. Guyford Stever and his agency colleagues found neither side willing to concede much to the other. The following week, however, the senator had the last word by making public his "award" for the "biggest waste of the taxpayer's money for the month of March" based on a NSF grant for research on interpersonal relationships which the senator characterized as a study on why people fall in love (in 1976, Proxmire institutionalized these monthly pronouncements as his "Golden Fleece Awards").¹⁹

HI Controversy over Science Education

Although attacks on individual grants were not new, their